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The Rebellious Nightingale and the Red Rose

How and based on what standards love was perceived or defined in the Victorian Era? The answer of these questions can be traced in “The Nightingale and the Rose” by Oscar Wilde, which is an allegorical short story about love (courtship), sacrifice, and selfishness. This story was published in 1888 during the late Victorian Era alongside four other short children stories under the title of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. The late Victorian Era encompasses some major movements, such as aestheticism and early modernism. Therefore, despite the fact that the surface of “The Nightingale and the Rose” usually presents it as children’s entertainment, its allegory and satire functions along the line of these movements in the late Victorian Era and makes adults the primary target of this story. In a 1882 lecture, six years before publishing this short story, Wilde states, “to disagree with three fourths of all England on all points of view is one of the first elements of sanity” (199). This statement indicates Wilde’s status regarding the society in which he used to live. Most of Wilde’s works including “The Nightingale and the Rose” were influenced by his negative point of view regarding the conservative society of the Victorian Era. Using satire, allegory, and juxtaposition of opposite images in “The Nightingale and the Rose,” Wilde tries to show his rebellion against the ideal mindset of Victorian society regarding love; this rebellion is first targeted against those who measure love based on the expectation of their demanding society and second, against those who try to give love a rational/logical definition.

Formalism is the theoretical perspective in which this paper is guided by. The way in which Wilde's text is analyzed in this paper corresponds to "The Theory of the "Formal Method" by Boris Eichenbaum. In this essay Eichenbaum states:

In principle the question for the Formalist is not how to study literature, but what the subject matter of literary study actually is. We neither discuss methodology nor quarrel about it. We speak and may speak only about theoretical principles suggested to us not by this or that ready-made methodology, but by the examination of specific material in its specific context (925).

Similarly, this paper analyzes Wilde's "The Nightingale and the Rose" within its framework of allegory, satire, juxtaposition of opposing images and their irony. As Witmsatt and Beardsley state in "The Intentional Fallacy," the text is now the critic's own and not the author's; it belongs to the public, embodied in language (the peculiar possession of the public), and it is about human beings (an object of public knowledge) (1234). This way of analyzing the story leaves this text detached from its author.

Wilde begins his story by a sense of perfection that was expected in the Victorian society. He manifests this expected perfection through a red rose. A young Student who is in love with the daughter of a professor is promised a dance if he brings her a red rose. In the first line of the story, the young Student says, "'She said that she would dance with me if I brought her red roses,' cried the young Student; 'but in all my garden there is no red rose'" (1). As Mrs. C. E. Humphry states in her book, *Manners for Men*, "beginning a love relationship in the 19th century was much more challenging than it is today. In Victorian times, much more etiquette was called for" (250). The sad young Student shows that Wilde tries to illustrate the impact of Victorian's unrealistic expectations on those who do not possess the required Victorian etiquette; when they do not possess those required etiquettes, they would be dismissed as an unsuitable mate. In this story, through the young Student's

frustration, for courting her beloved in the Prince's ball, Wilde further tries to indicate how love relationships at his time were complicated because of those unrealistic expectations. It shows that courtship was seen as something much more than a romantic relationship; it was taken very seriously since it might have led the couples to marriage. And marriage was the ultimate goal of women in the Victorian Era. As the result of taking the romantic relationships very seriously, Victorian women were looking for types of men who the demanding society thinks as ideal. Wilde basically mocks this type of mindset in his story.

In the red rose, not only does Wilde show the high expectation of the Victorian ladies for men's courtship, but also the shallowness of these expectations without taking the person's personality and characteristic into consideration. Therefore, in a way, the red rose can be considered as both Wilde's tool for presenting the high expectations of Victorian society and mocking those expectations at the same time because of their shallowness. In another words, Wilde is rebelling against the ideal mindset of Victorian courtship through a red rose. As this red rose is only symbolic of the meanings attached to it, Plato's attack on the representation of idea into falsehood becomes significant. The writer does not tell the truth, but is rather engaged in doing the opposite. Wilde's red rose does not reflect or take expression from the era in which he lived, but instead it gives shape to the Victorian Era.

In the Victorian Era, the romantic relationships functioned based on principles other than pure/true love. For example, while the Student was crying and his eyes were filled with tears he says, "Ah, on what little things does happiness depend! I have read all that the wise men have written, and all the secrets of philosophy are mine, yet for want of a red rose is my life made wretched" (1). These lines indicate that the young Student's frustration is not solely because of being rejected, but it is also because of the way in which he is rejected. He is moaning because his wisdom and his character are all degraded in the expense of the want of a red rose. Wilde rebels against those ideal Victorian expectations because they do not allow people to get involve in a relationship that its main fundamental tenant is pure/true love.

Wilde uses the Nightingale as the representation of a true lover. As this young Student is vocalizing his despair in the garden of his house, a Nightingale hears him from his nest on the oak-tree. The bird is deeply moved by the Student's pain because of his love and considers him as a "true lover" (1). The way in which the Nightingale views the young Student is very romantic. In a way, the bird sees in the young Student a reflection of her own heart and says, "night after night have I sung of him, though I knew him not; night after night I have told his story to the stars, and now I see him" (2). After recognizing the young Student as a "true lover," the Nightingale describes the true love by saying, "Surely love is a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor it is set forth in the market-place. It may not be purchased of the merchants, nor can it be weighed out in the balance for gold" (2). The comparisons between love and precious things, such as emeralds and opals gives love a different meaning and image. It digs deep down in the entity of love and reveals its value as something priceless that never can be compared/exchanged with the earthly materialistic things in the market-place.

Through the Nightingale's definition of love, Wilde is trying to say that love is priceless and cannot be measured by any standard, even if those standards are demanded by society. It basically serves as a satire for those who actually trade true faithful love with superficial materialistic things in Wilde's Era. And since in this story, the daughter of the Professor is suggested to be from the class of bourgeoisies, this satire is more likely targeted towards them. This shows Wilde's resistance to the authority of shallow bourgeoisies' morality. Through the artistic comparison of love with precious/expensive materials, Wilde further gives his story a didactic attribute because it teaches the people of his era about the true love. This part also conveys that love should be enjoyed, celebrated, and experienced for love's sake instead of personal and social interests. This point is parallel to the aesthetic

movements in the in the late 19th century that basically celebrated and valued art for art's sake. Similarly, love as a form of art needs to be appreciated in this way.

Through the personification of talking flora and fauna¹ the superficial ideal love of Victorian Era is once more displayed and reinforced. Alongside the Nightingale, a little Green Lizard, a Butterfly, and a Daisy hear the young Student's weeping and wonder about the reason of his sorrow. Once the Nightingale tells them that the young Student is weeping for a red rose, they reply, "'For a red rose!' they cried; 'how very ridiculous,' and the little Lizard, who was something of cynic, laughed outright" (2). "The various animals and flowers in the garden think the lovelorn student's act of 'weeping for a red rose' is ridiculous and the little Lizard laughs outright at such a romantic notion" (Jones 886). The mentioned creatures "enter the story with an act which looks like compassion, but proves to be curiosity" because of their mocking tone at the end of their conversations (Jones 886). Wilde uses these creatures as a metaphor to portray the ignorant people of his society who do not understand the profound meaning of love.

The Nightingale, who is used as the representation of a true lover, is also taken to be the one who is aware about the profound meaning of love. Unlike the rest of the creatures, the Nightingale who sees in the young Student the type of love she sings every night, is touched by the young Student's weeping and sorrow; she understands love and passion and decides to help the young Student. According to Jones:

This contradictory confrontation, or rather juxtaposition, put emphasis on the contrast between the ignorance and shallow-mindedness of ordinary mass of Victorian people, who just lived a plant- or animal-like life, and the awareness of conscious elite, who care about hidden meanings of the universe and life (112).

¹ Plants and animals that live in a particular area, time period, or environment (Merriam-Webster). This is one of the fundamental elements of fairy tales that also exists in Wilde *The Nightingale and the Rose*.

The Nightingale represents those mindful people who care about the hidden meanings of love. Based on Guy Willoughby “that ‘imaginative sympathy’ is crucial to the Nightingale’s accomplishment, for she represents the Romantic artist, who will be martyred (towards the end of the story) by a hostile society which fails to comprehend the value of her art” (110). Neither the Professor’s daughter nor the young Student understand the profound meaning of love since the Nightingale is the only character who is actively engaged in the love quest. Unlike in most romantic stories, the hero of this one is not the young Student, but rather the Nightingale once she sets on her love quest².

Wilde believes that the profound meaning of true love does not comprise egoism. For example, in the conversation between the Nightingale and the rose bushes, she repeats this statement three times, “‘give me a red rose,’ she cried, ‘and I will sing you my sweetest song.’” (3). The repetition of this statement put more emphasis on the unselfish attribute of love, which is in opposition to the Victorian love that is measured by the amount of materialistic things a partner can offer to his/her beloved based on his/her social and economical status. Therefore, this juxtaposition and its repetition is a satire for the Victorian ideal selfish love that is more inclined to a bargain rather than romantic unselfish relationship. So, in a way, the statement of the Nightingale and its repetition tries to say that the ideal love is when one gives more than he/she takes.

The unselfish attribute of love illuminates itself in the sacrifice of the Nightingale. The Nightingale not only is willing to offer her lovely voice, but also her life for love³. In reply to the third rose bush the Nightingale says, “Death is great price to pay for a red rose

² The Nightingale flies around in search of a red rose and comes across three rose bushes that make up her three-stage love quest. The first and the second rose bushes reject her since they respectively offer white and yellow roses. The third rose bush finally offers her a red rose if she agrees to some certain condition.

³ The sympathetic Nightingale has to press her breast against the thorn of the rose bush so that her life-blood flows into bush’s vein and sings all night for the bush in order to get a red rose. “Traditionally, the red rose is believed to be infused with the song bird’s blood, for by piercing itself against the thorn the nightingale is able to sing by night, and so to resist falling asleep” (Williams 153).

and life is very dear to all... Yet love is better than life" (4). This is the moment when the Nightingale's description of true love⁴ is transferred into action and reality. In this point, the "allegory of the artist's self-sacrifice for the sake of art" is once more evident (Miller 30). The necessary relationship between pain and great art (which is love here) is explicit: the artist's (the Nightingale's) "despair" will be his audiences' "delight," his pain will be "beautiful" to his viewers (Willoughby 110). So, the Nightingale, by investing in love out of her suffering, perfects both herself and her love for the young Student. This form of love is in exact opposition to the ideal Victorian love since its perfection is based on sacrifice and unselfishness; it is about being beneficial to your beloved rather than taking advantage of him/her.

Wilde believes that the unselfish engagement in love contributes to its pureness. The love of the Nightingale becomes very pure that in some point it can stand as a metaphor for Christ. The connection between the quality of the bird's songs and the rose that is infused with its blood acquires a richer meaning because of its central connection with the medieval myth that Christ's blood turned the white rose red at the time of crucifixion (Willoughby 112). The parallel image of the Nightingale and the Christ elevates the Nightingale's love and characteristic. In a way, the love of Nightingale, which is the reverse of the ideal Victorian love, has heavenly attribute and purity. Since the love of Nightingale is in contrast to the Victorian love, the latter is portrayed evil. So, as it is evident, through this metaphor and parallel images, there is a hidden sense of rebellious towards the Victorian love.

Wilde thinks that the profound meaning of true love does not comprise logic or rationality. For example, the student does not understand the language of the Nightingale since "he only knew the things that are written down in books" (4). In this part of the story, the oak-tree who loves and is filled with passion hears the Nightingale and understands what

⁴ The moment when the Nightingale says that love "is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals; it neither can be purchased in the market-place nor can be weighed out in the balance of gold" (Wilde 2).

she says. The juxtaposition of the young Student's rationality and the oak-tree's passion reinforces the rebellious against the ideal Victorian love as a type of love that is filled not only with the expectation of the demanding society, but also with rationality. So, the inability of the young Student to understand the language of the Nightingale (that is filled with the passion of true love) can be considered as "a symbolic reaction against the rationalism and materialism of the age" being another basic tenant of dealing with love and romantic relationship.

To Wilde, love itself has the capability of being meaningful and beneficial without bringing in other elements. For instance, when the young Student does not understand the passionate language of the Nightingale, he says, "in fact, she is like most artists; she is all style, without any sincerity. She would not sacrifice herself for others. Still, it must be admitted that she has some beautiful notes. What a pity that they do not mean anything, or do any practical good" (5). Whatever the young Student says is actually a description of himself and the daughter of the Professor whom cannot appreciate love and its beauty without bringing in other elements. In other words, to them, love should be a source of pleasure and if it does not satisfy the lovers with tangible or materialistic benefits then it will not be capable of being meaningful or practically beneficial. This part is parallel to the scene where the Nightingale was hearing the young Student's weeping and moaning. Just the way in which the Nightingale saw the young Student in the image of herself, the young Student also saw the Nightingale in the image of himself and the daughter of the Professor. While the young Student goes back to his room and thinks about love, the Nightingale sets on her quest and actively engages herself in the passion of love⁵.

⁵ All night long she sings with her breast against the thorn. "She sings first of the birth of love in the heart of a boy and a girl," then she presses her breast "closer against the thorn, and louder and louder grow her song, for she sings of the birth of passion" (5). The growth of the Nightingale's sound, while she is singing, shows her active engagement in the passion of love that is in contrast to the passive engagement of both the young Student and the Professor's daughter.

Since the young Student's brain functions logically, he is sure that after the giving of the rose, he will be accepted; in the young Student's equation, instead of his passion, the rose is the element which solves the issue of love. For instance, after the student offers the daughter of the Professor "the reddest rose in all the world⁶," he states "you will wear it tonight next to your heart as we dance together it will tell you how I love you" (6). The Professor's daughter rejects the young Student because as she says, "the Chamberlain's nephew has sent her some real jewels, and everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers" (6). This is Professor's daughter description of love which is exactly in contrast to the Nightingale who gave love more value than fine emeralds, opals, and gold. This definition of love is very suitable for a girl who treats love as trade and a mean for the elevation of her economical or social status and replaces her passion with the tangible materialistic objects she can receive from her partner. Once he faces the girl's frown instead of warm acceptance, the young Student throws the rose into the street where a cartwheel went over it.

The young Student then considers both the girl and love as something absurd. The story ends with his expression about love:

'What a silly thing Love is,' said the Student as he walked away. 'It is not half as useful as Logic, for it does not prove anything, and it is always telling one of things that are not going to happen, and making one believe things that are not true. In fact, it is quite unpractical, and, as in this age to be practical is everything, I shall go back to Philosophy and study Metaphysics' (5).

⁶ After the Nightingale sacrifices herself, a red rose appears in the bush. The young Student who is very enthusiastic quickly plucks it and runs to the house of the Professor. In this section, "the house of the Professor can symbolize a real society, with appropriate roles for each of its members. For instance, the father can symbolize the king/ruler, and his daughter (who might suffer under his father's ill-tempered manner) can appear as subjects" (Jones 888).

These lines show the young Student's definition of love, which corresponds to Plato's attack on falsehood. It is parallel to Plato's idea of how poetry or art in general is the representation of reality. Just like the way the young Student thinks love does not speak of truth, Plato also believes that the poet speaks not from knowledge but from inspiration (or madness-for Plato it is much the same thing), so he cannot be trusted as someone who conveys truth/reality (Hall 3). The young Student and Plato respectively think that love and poetry/art lead people to the path of wickedness. In the last line, the young Student questions the didactic aspect of love⁷; similarly, Plato is concerned about whether the expressions of poets/artists are either constructive or destructive. According to the young Student and Plato, respectively love and art are dangerous since they represent men doing unworthy things and do not constructively teach. This presentation of love as false is then as old as Plato and clearly not a new idea. Nonetheless, with the sacrifice of the Nightingale, Wilde tries to show that she is the one who understands true love (or art) since she used her passion instead of reason in her love quest. For Wilde, one cannot understand love, (or in larger scale art) using reason.

Both the daughter of the Professor and the young Student represent the way in which the ideal love was perceived during the Victorian Era. Based on this story, it is evident that Wilde is attacking two groups: first, those who treat love as a trade and a mean to elevate their social and economical status, second, those who try to engage and understand love through thinking rather than feelings or passions. Throughout the story, the readers come across three different types of definition of love; first the passionate description of the Nightingale, second, the selfish materialistic definition of the Professor's daughter, and third, the logical description of love from the young Student's point of view. With the sacrifice of the Nightingale, Wilde makes her definition to be the most valid one since the Nightingale treated love for love's sake; in a way, the Nightingale's love did not embrace any concerns

⁷ This is the reason behind why Wilde capitalizes the word 'Student' throughout the story; with this capitalization, he tries to reinforce the rational aspect of the character.

regarding herself. The Nightingale's passion was the key element, which enabled her to treat love for love's sake. The mindset of the Professor's daughter and the young Student regarding love is served as the subject of satire throughout the story since in the Victorian Era, the concept of love was perceived and defined materialistically and rationally. So, it is evident that Wilde's negative point of view regarding Victorian society embraced their perception or definition of love. In general, as a leader of aestheticism and modernism, Wilde tries to break away from the conventions of early Victorian period regarding love and art through satire, allegory, and juxtaposition of opposite images. Wilde's rebellious Nightingale and the red rose demolish the Victorian materialistic and rational perception/definition of love.

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